

MENNONITE HISTORICAL BULLETIN

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John S. Coffman Pioneer Mennonite Evangelist

CLAYTON SWARTZENTRUBER

I. The Boy

The great-grandfather of John S. Coffman emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania near the close of the eighteenth century. The name of John's grandfather was Isaac Coffman. Isaac and his wife Esther were blessed with a large family. Soon they were much concerned in locating in a good place, which would provide places for their children to establish their homes.

Later Isaac and Esther Coffman moved to Rockingham County, Virginia. This location proved to be only temporary. In 1787 one could have seen them slowly picking their way over the Allegheny Mountains. It was a hard and tedious journey, but with motives of unselfishness and love for their children the journey was a joy.

They settled now in the region where only a year earlier the whoops of the savage had been heard. Their new location was in Greenbrier County, now in West Virginia.

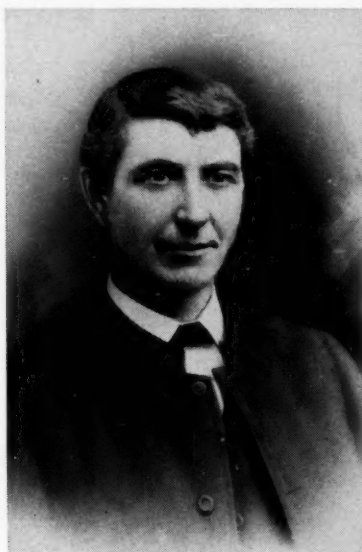
Christian, the third son of Isaac and Esther Coffman, married Anna Wenger of Rockingham County. To this union God granted ten children. The fourth child was Samuel, the father of John.

In the spring of 1847 Samuel went to Rockingham County to work. It was to his advantage when he made the acquaintance of a beautiful girl, Frances Weaver, whom he married in the fall of 1847.

In July, 1852, Samuel Coffman was ordained to the ministry. Nine years later he became bishop, and was responsible for the churches of the Central District of Virginia.

Samuel Coffman became known to many children as "Grandpa Coffman." He was kind and affectionate. In his official dealings he was considerate and impartial. However, he didn't lack backbone nor administrative punch. He was a leader in a very real way. These qualities and virtues of Samuel Coffman were beautifully ingrained in his noble son John.

It was in the fall of the year—all nature seemed to be dressed for the occasion—a mother had been much in prayer. Because of her consecration to the Lord it was a happy day, October 16, 1848, when she gave birth to her first child, John. The mother's feelings may be expressed in her own words:



John S. Coffman, 1848-99

Never again did I enjoy such a blessed feeling and have such a bright token at the birth of any of my children as I witnessed at this time, much as I longed for it.

Early John gave evidence to some sterling qualities. One day after his mother had related to him the crucifixion of Christ on the cross, she noticed that he was deeply impressed. He was crying bitterly. In answer to his mother's question he said, "I think they did Christ a great wrong. Those men must have been very wicked or they would not have treated Christ so shamefully." It was with deep emotion that John in later years referred to the crucifixion experience of Christ.

John certainly was a "mother's boy." He would often go to her for advice. At times it was nerve-racking to her because of the questions he would ask. It seemed that his young mind was full of questions. He was not a rough boy, but seemed to delight in playing games of a harmless nature.

Educational facilities were unknown. In fact, before the Civil War there were no free schools in Virginia. It was a day when education was superfluous. The knowledge that a person gained above what he actually needed to transact business was considered useless. And to pursue a higher degree of learning was thought of as a waste of time.

(Continued on page 3)

The Mennonites Establishing Themselves in Pennsylvania

JOHN C. WENGER

1. Immigration

Stray Dutch Mennonite traders were in New Amsterdam, now New York, as early as 1644. And in 1663 a Dutchman named Cornelius Plockhoy established a colony on a stream called the Horekill which flows into Delaware Bay. A number of Mennonites were included in the Plockhoy Colony. The colony had a short life, being destroyed by the English a year or two after its founding. It was not until 1683 that a permanent colony of Quakers and Mennonites was founded several miles from Philadelphia. Since it was settled by immigrants from Crefeld, Germany, it got the name Germantown attached to it. "I have many chickens and geese, and a garden," wrote one settler to a friend in Europe some time after his arrival in 1684, "and shall next year have an orchard if I am well, so that my wife and I are in good spirits, and are reaching a condition of ease and prosperity. . . ." The settlers of 1683 all came from Crefeld, Germany; they were followed in turn by Mennonites from the Lower Rhine; from Hamburg-Altona; from the Palatinate; and from the Netherlands: a total of about forty Mennonite families having settled in Germantown between 1683 and 1708.

In the year 1709 Mennonite immigration to North America began in real earnest. The immigrants of the following decades were not Dutch but Palatines. William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, wrote to his secretary in Pennsylvania, James Logan: "Herewith comes the Palatines, whom use with tenderness and love, and fix them so that they may send over an agreeable character; for they are sober people, divers Mennonites, and will neither swear nor fight. See that Guy has used them well." (Guy was their ship captain.)

2. Settlements

The first outpost of the Germantown settlement was about twenty miles to the northwest, a place in what is now Montgomery County called Skipack. Some Germantown Mennonites settled at Skipack as early as 1702. The Palatine Mennonite immigrants of 1709 and the following years passed by the town of Germantown and pressed on to the Skipack rural area. Other settlements were made in rapid succession: the Schuylkill Valley and the Manatawny section (now Chester,

Montgomery, and Berks counties, Pennsylvania); other sections of Montgomery County, and in Bucks and Lehigh counties. The oldest congregations of the Franconia Conference settlements were Skippack, Coventry, Hereford, Swamp, and Deep Run. In the eighteenth century the Franconia Conference had churches all over the southeastern counties of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, Montgomery, Chester, Bucks, Berks, Lehigh, and Northampton. The bulk of the settlers were not Dutch, but Swiss by ethnic origin, most of them coming, however, not from Switzerland directly, but from the Palatinate.

The most prosperous settlement in Pennsylvania was not that which radiated outward from the counties just mentioned, however. This distinction belongs to the Pequea and Conestoga settlements which in time developed into the great Lancaster Mennonite Conference. It was in 1710 that the original Pequea settlement was made in the general area of the village of Willow Street. What is now Lancaster County was then a part of Chester. (The town of Lancaster was at first known as Hickory Town.) The Conestoga settlement was made in 1717. In the following decades a strong immigration of Swiss (Palatine) Mennonites swelled the original settlements and formed new ones. The Hickory Town area became the most powerful Mennonite colony in Pennsylvania, in Colonial America, and even today is stronger than any other Mennonite conference east of the Mississippi.

The family names of Franconia and Lancaster are almost completely separate: in Franconia we find such names as Alderfer, Allebach, Biehn, Bechtel, Beidler, Bergey, Cassel, Clemens, Clemmer, Derstine, Detweiler, Fried, Funk, Gehman, Geisinger, Godshalk, Gross, Halde-man, Hiestand, Hoch, Hunsberger, Hunsicker, Jansen (Johnson now), Kolb, Landis, Lapp, Leatherman, Lederach, Mack, Meyer-Moyer, Nice, Oberholtzer, Oberholt, Pannebecker, Reiff, Rickert, Rittenhouse, Rosenberger, Rush, Ruth, Shelly, Souder, Stauffer, Stover, Swartley, Tyson, Walter, Weber, Wismer, Yoder, Yothers, Young, and Ziegler. In Lancaster one finds such names as Auker, Baer, Boll, Bomberger, Bowman, Boyer, Brackbill, Brennenman, Brubacher, Bucher, Buckwalter, Burkhardt, Burkholder, Charles, Danner, Denlinger, Doner, Eberley, Ebersole, Eby, Erb, Eshleman, Forey, Frantz, Gehman, Geigley, Gingrich, Good, Graybill, Greider, Groff, Habacker, Harnish, Hernley, Herr, Hershey, Hess, Horning, Hoover, Horst, Hostetter, Kauffman, Keener, Kendig, Greider-Kreider, Kurtz, Landis, Lauver, Leaman, Lehman, Lefever, Longenecker, Lutz, Martin, Mellinger, Metzler, Miller, Mosemann, Musser, Myers, Newcomer, Newswanger, Nissley, Nolt, Oberholtzer, Ranck, Ressler, Reist, Risser, Rohrer, Roth, Rupp, Rutt, Sauder, Seitz, Senger, Sensenig, Shank, Shenk, Shertzer, Shirk, Shope, Sieber, Snavely, Stauffer, Stoner, Strickler, Weber-Weaver, Weiney,

Wenger, Wert, Witmer, Zeiset, and Zimmerman.

3. Daily Life

In Colonial America life centered about the home and the church. Little else concerned the settlers. Their first task was to clear the forests, build themselves homes, and erect a dual-purpose building for church and school. The women manufactured soap from fat, lye, and rain water. Rye or whole-wheat bread was also homemade. They spun flax and made clothing for the entire family. They also made butter, cheese, and apple butter at home. Wine and whisky were considered essential for tonics, for medicine, and for moderate social drinking. The use of tobacco was also common. Prior to 1825 the usual mode of travel was riding horses. The men were compelled to do all their farm work by hand; there was much backbreaking work and no labor-saving inventions.

The clothing of the pioneers would appear quaint today: The men wore buckle shoes, knee breeches, frock coats without lapels, and high silk or beaver hats. The women wore plain headdress, a long and full plain dress, and large cloaks. About the time of the Revolutionary War long trousers began to be worn by the men. In summertime the men went barefoot a great deal, even to the "meeting" (religious service). The big social events were marriages and funerals when the whole community came together. The language of the pioneers was Palatine German to which in the course of time considerable English was added, producing the famous "Pennsylvania Dutch." *Aver die Leit saage zu viel iever die Sprooch, un' viel saage meh' a's sie wisse'.* (People talk about the language too much, and many say more than they know.)

4. The Church

The church life of the pioneers was simple, dignified, sincere, and satisfying. The Mennonites had not yet become American activists. Services were usually held about every two weeks on a Sunday morning, with no exact time stipulated for the beginning of the meeting. Choristers led the congregation in singing one-part German hymns. The deacon read a chapter from the German (Saur, Germantown) Bible, remaining seated to read. The congregation knelt in silent prayer. Then the minister preached a sermon, about an hour in length. After the sermon the other ordained men gave "testimony" that the sermon was in harmony with the Word of God. The final prayer was an audible petition which was always completed with the Lord's Prayer. After another hymn the benediction was pronounced, over a seated audience in the Franconia Conference.

In the Franconia district communion services were held annually in the spring; in Lancaster in spring and fall. In the Lancaster district feet washing was practiced as a church ordinance in connection with the communion service, but not in Franconia as a whole. Fast days were

occasionally observed. In the autumn, after the ingathering of crops, "Harvest Home" services were held to express thanksgiving to the Lord of Harvests.

Bishops (elders), ministers, and deacons did not choose their own offices. When there was need of a given official in a congregation votes were cast and when two or more brethren received votes—the usual experience—lots were cast in a solemn service to determine who was called of the Lord. The individual immediately assumed his responsibilities with the loyal support and earnest prayers of his former fellow laymen.

5. Economic and Social Life

The communities of the first century were self-contained German communities, the major non-Mennonite contacts being confined to their Reformed and Lutheran neighbors, also Pennsylvania Germans. Family life was strong, divorce was unknown, families were large, often as many as ten or more children. Everyone worked hard, idleness being considered a sin and recreation never heard of. It was taken for granted that everyone would either farm or work for another farmer. Marriage with "outsiders" was rather rare. In general boys and girls grew up on the parental homesteads, attended the elementary school maintained by the Mennonite community, worked for their parents until they were married, and then settled down on a near-by farm which the parents of one or the other marriage partner helped them rent or purchase. Money was often scarce but there was always plenty to eat and wear, and much work to be done. The pioneers were happy, busy, and satisfied. They were a healthy lot of people. Their faith satisfied all their needs. They knew there was a kind and beneficent Father in heaven who had guided them across the Atlantic to the earthly Paradise of Pennsylvania. Where a tragedy occurred, perhaps a horse kicked a man fatally, the relatives of the widow sustained her economically, and if necessary the church through its deacons helped, until the children were old enough to assume the financial burdens of their mother.

6. Situation Spiritually

The Pennsylvania Mennonites were quite different in some respects from their Swiss Brethren forefathers of the era 1525-30. Their Christianity was not that of "radical" Christians; it had settled down to a comfortable, conventional, denominational type. There was no thought of evangelistic work, no need of any kind of mission work, no occasion to alter any of the set patterns of worship. The faith and practice of the immigrants was good and satisfying; why change? From 1683 until the ordination of John H. Oberholtzer almost 160 years later no great changes were made, and no one intended to make any. The Bible had not changed; why should anyone introduce any innovations? Only with great effort would it be possible to introduce Sunday schools, evangelistic services, Bible study

and prayer meetings, evening services, church boards of charities, publication, education, and missions. This was the situation 160 years after the thirty-five Crefelders arrived at Philadelphia on the good ship *Concord* October 6, 1683.

—Printed originally in part in *Mennonite Life*, North Newton, Kansas.

JOHN S. COFFMAN

(Continued from page 1)

David A. Heatwole, father of L. J. Heatwole, was largely responsible for giving the young people in his day the desire for an education. He not only gave them the desire, but also assisted them in many ways. He opened a night school for the boys of the neighborhood, where he taught them the common subjects. With the boys under his direct influence he was able to impress upon them the necessity and assets of an education. John Coffman, along with other boys, took advantage of this opportunity. The progress of the boys gave David Heatwole the needed stimulus and he directed his energies into more extensive channels.

The need for a school building became evident. Several of the brethren donated money to David Heatwole for the purpose of building a schoolhouse. This gave the man much courage and the building was soon completed.

John was talented in many ways. As a young man he took much interest in singing. Mrs. Samuel Burkholder said of him, "John was never a wild boy; he was more quiet." Even while going to school, instead of getting into mischief, he delighted in getting some boys together and singing. It was also said of him that he would usually try to have a singing some place on Sunday afternoon. These singings were held in the schoolhouse, and sometimes in John's home, or one of his friends'. He was the natural leader of the group and he usually led the singing.

In order to shed another ray of light upon his character, notice what Peter S. Hartman says of him.

I have been with Brother Coffman from twelve years of age to the time he left Virginia more than with any other man, and I can say honestly I have seen less foolishness in him and more practical common sense than in anyone I was ever with in all my life.

It is with a sense of deep gratitude and admiration that we reflect on his conversion experience. It was a warm, balmy evening early in the summer while he was out in the orchard when conviction set its firm grasp upon him. Here is what he said of this experience:

For the first time I felt that I was a sinner, lost and without hope in the world. I was so burdened that I cast myself under the tree and prayed to my God for help and to the Lord for salvation until He answered me.

John was sixteen at this time. Several weeks later he was baptized in Muddy Creek, near the Bank Church.

In this period of John's life there were dark clouds hanging over the nation. There was political unrest. The race problem was rising to a peak. Already one could hear the roar of war. Brother was fighting against brother, father against son, and friend against friend. There are many sad and pathetic stories unreel from this period. There is no doubt that these years had a weakening effect upon the United States. Now our Mennonite fathers were not free from the effects of those warring years.

During John's manhood General Sheridan swept down through the beautiful Shenandoah devastating things as he went. It was the Shenandoah Valley, the garden of the South, that furnished the southern army with more grain, provisions, and horses than any other section of the country.

General Grant ordered General Sheridan to raid the valley and destroy buildings, burn the barns, and take the grain. They took many of the horses and hogs; and what they were not able to take with them they destroyed or killed so that those things would not be at the disposal of the Confederate Army. Matters in the valley were becoming tense. It was finally decided that some of the young men would go to Harrisonburg and apply to the Union Army as refugees.

One of John's best friends, Peter Hartman, was in this group along with some other boys. They made their appearance before General Sheridan, who had a very stern countenance. One of the fellows later commented on the jolt he received when he first was brought before him. The general inquired of a guard concerning the business of the boys. He was informed that they wished to join his company as refugees and travel north with him. This way the boys would avoid the possibility of being drafted into the Confederate Army against their wishes. Immediately after the general was informed of the boys' intent his expression changed. Soon a broad smile crossed his hardened face and he manifested a good spirit, and told the boys he would be very happy to have them in his company. Furthermore he told them that if any of his men had taken any of their horses, and they could identify them, it would be all right for the boys to ride them north. Peter Hartman recognized one of his father's horses; so he took it, and received permission to go home and get a saddle. The next day the company, and it was a huge military affair, was off for the north.

Peter Hartman was riding his horse. The other fellows, and John, were with the company's men, and rode with them. General Sheridan moved north as far as Martinsburg. There the company was called to a halt. The boys were eager to get across the Potomac, and out of the Confederates' territory. They secured

passage on a stagecoach from Martinsburg north across the Potomac. Peter decided to take his horse along; so he followed the stage. The stagecoach driver informed Peter that the Potomac was difficult to ford, but that if he, Peter, would stay with the coach all would be well. With this arrangement the fellows left Sheridan's company. When they were just several miles from the Potomac several Union soldiers were riding by, and seeing that Peter's horse was branded "U. S." demanded that he stop. General Sheridan had branded all the horses in this way for identification. The Union soldier accused Peter of stealing the Union's horse. Fortunately General Sheridan had given Peter a pass for both himself and the horse. After some discussion the soldiers consented to let Peter go. Dismay seized Peter as he rode hard ahead. The encounter with the soldiers had taken some time, and the stagecoach with John Coffman in it, was far out of sight. Would he be able to catch it before they crossed the Potomac? He rode as hard as the steed would go. For several miles he kept his keen eye on the watch. He knew he was close to the river, but the stagecoach had not yet been seen. Furiously he spurred down through the valley, then up a small knoll; there before him was the Potomac, and the stagecoach was just starting to ford it. Quickly he joined his comrades.

John Coffman, Peter Hartman, and the other fellows worked in the vicinity of Hagerstown until the war closed. John also worked in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania. Before returning to Virginia it was their privilege to observe the funeral procession of Abraham Lincoln in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The war was over, as far as Virginia was concerned, on April 9, 1865. The boys prepared to go back home. The boys returned home by stagecoach.

As John was walking in the lane, his sister Mary saw him. The signal given, all rushed out to meet him. There was truly a happy meeting among deplorable surroundings. Many barns were destroyed, cribs were empty, and houses needed repairs. John was the man for the hour. A few days later he and some other energetic boys of the community formed a carpenter's gang and went to work. There was much work to be done, and here were the men to do it.

One can easily imagine the discouragement that some of these people had to experience. Those war years were terrible ones. Some of them lost nearly everything they had. It was with this state of affairs that John and the boys worked. In the evening they would go and visit some depressed family. They sang songs of hope and sunshine.

Already John was living for others. "Living for Jesus, a life that is true; trying to please Him in all that I do." Certainly a life of unselfishness is a great one.

(To be concluded in July issue)

Book Reviews

Robert Friedmann: *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries. Its Genius and Its Literature*. The Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, 1949; pp. xvi & 287. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, No. 7. \$3.50.

This book is a first attempt to portray the inner spiritual history of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement from its beginnings to the modern period. It is the fruit of a unique lifetime of study and thought which began in the University of Vienna, continued in England, and was finally brought to this conclusion in the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College. The author confesses that the study is for him more than an interesting historical subject: "... It appears in my vision as one of the greatest manifestations of the Gospel-spirit in the world, the attempt to materialize, at least to a great extent, on this earth the truth of the Word of God."

The book is divided into two studies. Study I is a historical analysis of the relationship between Anabaptism and Pietism. Study II is a study of Mennonite devotional literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which illustrates an amplifies Study I.

The author points out that of the three main sectors of Anabaptism, the Holland and Northwest German sector moved toward rationalism. The Hutterian Brethren of Austria remained aloof from the world and were least affected by outside influences. It was the Swiss Anabaptists of Switzerland and South Germany who were most affected by the Pietistic movement. Therefore this book concentrates chiefly on the latter sector of the movement, and consequently is of great interest to the so-called "old" Mennonites, as it is mainly from this sector that we have come.

After the statement of the problem the book begins with the contrast between Anabaptism and Pietism. The emphasis of Anabaptism is literal obedience to the New Testament. The emphasis of Pietism is the inward emotional aspects of religion, inward peace and joy. While there was also the note of real joy and peace in Anabaptism, yet it was a by-product of strict obedience to Christ. Anabaptism emphasized the kingdom or rule of God. Pietism emphasized justification by faith.

The main thesis of the book is that because of the conflict with the world and the flesh which literal obedience to the New Testament demands, the Anabaptist tends to fall to the temptation to move toward Pietism, which accepts the world order as it is and makes peace with it. This temptation and movement is evidenced by the change in the type of Mennonite literature. While original Anabaptist literature centered upon obedience and suffering, from the seventeenth century much of the popular literature has moved

toward emotionalism, inward peace, "victory," etc.

The last chapter of the book is an interesting one which shows the position of the late John Horsch and the Goshen school to the present Anabaptist revival. The book should be read by all serious-minded leaders of the Mennonite Church. This reviewer's main question regarding the book is the distinction made between the teaching of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. The statement is made that Anabaptism emphasized the teaching of Jesus, the kingdom of God, while Pietism emphasized the teaching of Paul, justification by faith. Has it been historically verified that the Anabaptists cited more passages from the Gospels than from the Epistles? John Horsch points out, for instance, that the Anabaptists do not emphasize the Sermon on the Mount as some Anabaptist students suppose.

It seems to this reviewer that this is a basic misunderstanding of the message of the Apostle Paul. He did teach justification by faith; so did Jesus. (Note the many and bold references to Jesus' person, even in the "Sermon on the Mount.") But justification by faith in the case of both teachers was never the end but the means. The primary emphasis of the apostle was the same as that of Jesus, the kingdom or rule of God. The climax of all his epistles was love; not love in the abstract, but love as concretely expressed and manifested in social relationships, especially relationships within the brotherhood. This desired response to the rule of God could be attained only by faith. Thus Paul avoided both Pietism and moralistic rationalism of later centuries.

Although the true emphasis of the Apostle Paul is not congenial to Pietism, yet it seems to this reviewer that there was a tendency in the early church somewhat analogous to Pietism. It was a popular tendency in the early church to give Christianity an individualistic, emotional expression. For example, instead of the obedience of love expressed in concrete brotherhood, there was a division in the Corinthian Church between the rich and poor as manifested at the communion service. Life was not dedicated to the building up of the brotherhood, but various abilities were used selfishly. Christianity to these people was the emotional uplift of speaking in tongues, etc.

It was just this popular tendency which Paul fought continuously in his Corinthian, Ephesian, and other letters. The analogy of the later Pietistic emphasis was not that of some of the apostolic leaders; They were united on the one platform of loving obedience. The temptation of Anabaptism toward Pietism seems to this reviewer to have been one of the great temptations of the early church against which the true apostolic leaders and brotherhood had to struggle.

Mennonite Publishing House.

Millard C. Lind.

Martyrs' Mirror Reprinted Again

J. C. WENGER

One of the greatest, if not the most significant, of all books ever written by Mennonites is the *Bloody Theater or Martyrs' Mirror* of T. J. van Braght, 1625-1664. The fifth English edition of this great tome has just come from the press. Like the fourth edition of 1938 this one was issued by Mennonite Publishing House, Scottdale, Pennsylvania. The cost of the volume is \$9.75. This is a book for every Sunday-school library and for every Mennonite home which is interested in preserving our nonresistant faith and our conception of the Christian life as discipleship.

The Old Order Amish congregations under the leadership of Levi D. Christner of Topeka, Indiana, are at present reprinting the German *Martyrs' Mirror* by the so-called offset method, essentially that of photographic reproductions of the book, page by page.

May these two reprint editions of the great Mennonite classic prove effective in acquainting Mennonite and Amish youth with the history and heritage of the brotherhood.

Goshen, Indiana.

Sustaining Members

1949

The Mennonite Historical Bulletin is published by, and mailed to the members of, The Mennonite Historical Association. Those who pay an annual membership fee of five dollars or more become for that year sustaining members. Twenty members are entitled to that recognition for the past year. Here is the list, as furnished by the treasurer of the association, Ira D. Landis, Route 3, Lititz, Pennsylvania:

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